

Secular/Religious Duality in American Society

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I . Secular or Religious?

The United States of America is one of the most secular nations and one of the most religious nations in the world. On the one hand, America seems to be very secularized. American society has been highly capitalized and commercialized. Every aspect of American society is oriented toward capitalistic profit making. On the other hand, America seems to be a very religious society. American people, including famous politicians, mention religious things again and again. When American people often sang ‘God Bless America’ after the 9-11 terrorist incident, former French President Chirac made a very cynical comment on this fact: ‘I am surprised by the fact that Americans are so pious!’

In her paper ‘Martin Luther King, Jr. and America’s Civil Religion’, Hortense Spillers has cited very interesting data from Kessler’s study. According to Kessler’s study (based upon Gallup polls and Gasetelli’s book), American people are very religious:

- 90% report that they believe in God
- 88% say they never doubted the existence of God
- 90% say that they pray
- 80% believe in miracles and Divine reward and punishment.

The data imply that the religious consciousness among Americans is surprisingly high. However, Spillers, as well as Kessler, draws the opposite conclusion from the same data. Large numbers of Christians in the US do not attend church and do not participate in congregational affairs. Only a small number read the Bible frequently, and possess only elementary knowledge of their faith. These data suggest that American religiosity is very shallow.

The same social inquiry implies the contradictory vision about American attitude toward religion. Nowadays the double meaning of American religiosity that I have mentioned is concretized in the so-called mega-church. On the one hand, of course, the mega-church symbolizes the American pious attitude. However, on the other hand, the services in mega-churches are like big concerts. It is big business that yields profit.

How can we integrate those two faces of American religiosity? How can we

explain the secular and religious attitude of Americans consistently? My comments on the three papers will be developed around this question. In my opinion, the concept of 'civil religion', which is focus of Spillers paper, is very convenient to describe the double aspects of American religiosity.

II . The Origin of Violence in American Religion

The theme of Gary Laderman's paper, 'Violence and Religious Life' is the relationship between violence and religion. According to this paper, politics are often driven by religious force. Violence can be a religious force. Laderman wrote 'American history is overflowing with a distinctly religious politics centered on physical violence, representation of violence, and threats of violence.' One of the examples that Laderman paid attention to is the movement of the Religious Right.

Every religion has a relationship to violence. My question about Laderman's paper is whether violence in American religion is unique or not. Is there a distinctive characteristic of American religious violence? I infer that the implication of Laderman's paper is that American religious history is especially full of violence compared with histories of other nations' religions. In American history, pure violence in itself has had sacred value. What is the cause of such American uniqueness?

Here I will give you another example that symbolizes the American attitude toward violence. This is of Johnny Cash's last song, "The Man Comes Around". It expresses the typical idea of Southern Baptist Christianity

There's a man going around taking names and he decides
Who to free and who to blame everybody won't be treated
Quite the same there will be a golden ladder reaching down
When the man comes around

The hairs on your arm will stand up at the terror in each
Sip and each sup will you partake of that last offered cup

....

Whoever is unjust let him be unjust still
Whoever is righteous let him be righteous still
Whoever is filthy let him be filthy still

This song tries to describe the image of Armageddon, the Last Day when God will appear and deliver the Last Judgment. This event is described as pure terror dominated by God's arbitrariness. This scene is very violent. God, a man who comes around, provokes fear among people by taking names, by deciding who is saved and who is damned. For human beings, the Judgment comes from outside. They cannot refute the merciless Judgment. Where does such cruelty come from?

The most important thing concerning American religion is that the base of American spirit is radical Protestantism. Although there are many religions in

America, Protestantism is the foundation of the American spirit. Therefore, we must explain the characteristic of violence in American religion by referring to the distinctive features of Protestantism.

Here I try to locate Protestantism among three main versions of Christianity in order to make the characteristic of Protestantism clear. My interest is not on the historical position, but on the logical position of Protestantism. In this context the explanation of three types of Christianity by S. Zizek is useful for my argument. Simply put, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism compose the Hegelian dialectic triad.

The key factor to which we have to pay attention is the relation between text (Bible) and believers. Under Eastern Orthodoxy, there is organic and substantial unity of the text and the corpus of believers. Therefore, believers are allowed to interpret the sacred Text. The Text lives in believers. In other words, religious goodness is directly concretized in the Christian community. In extreme cases, human beings can be deified.

Catholicism corresponds to the alienation of text from the corpus of believers. Then the entity which mediates between the sacred Text and believers must be introduced. Such an entity is the Church, the religious Institute. In this stage the Church maintains full autonomy from the community of believers. The highest authority resides in the Church. This is shown by the fact that only the Church has the right to interpret the Text. The Text is read in Latin, which is the language that ordinary believers cannot understand. For ordinary believers to interpret the text, neglecting the priest's guidance, is regarded as a sin. It means that the goodness is not directly concretized in the believers' community. Deification of human beings is denied. Only the disposition toward the goodness, so-called synteresis, among human beings is recognized. It is the Church that stands for the synteresis.

In Protestantism, the alienation is radicalized: i.e. the Text is alienated even from the religious institute (Church). Now the Text itself is the only authority. Every believer must make direct contact with the Word of God (Text). The importance of the mediator disappears. Because any particular institution that concretizes the divine goodness is rejected, divine universal goodness is extremely abstracted. Skipping the mediating particularity, singularity (each individual) has direct contact with universality. Now the synteresis (disposition of human being toward divine good) is rejected. In Catholicism, we, human beings, can communicate or negotiate with God. In Protestantism, the transcendence (or abstractiveness) of God is completed. Therefore any common measure shared by man and God is lost. God as impenetrable Beyond distributes grace in totally arbitrary ways. Man has to accept God's capricious intention without understanding it.

Here we arrive at the divine violence which Johnny Cash described in his song. Merciless, divine, sadistic violence appears as the result of Protestantism alienation of religious authority. In my opinion this is the origin of American

characteristic of religious violence.

At the same time, this hypothesis explains the origin of the double meaning of American religiosity (intersection between extreme secularization and extreme devoutness). On the one hand, the transcendence of God is held in Protestantism very rigorously. This leads to the pious attitude. However, on the other hand, any concrete entity that represents divine transcendence is excluded from the human world under Protestantism. This situation approaches to the inexistence of God, because God does not leave any trace that man can understand. Paradoxically the emphasis on God's transcendence accords with the negation of God.

III. Ironical Commitment

Andrew Rotter's paper "The Religious Typology of American Foreign Relations" is a very interesting paper. This paper tries to interpret U.S. foreign policy through theological 'typology.' In other words, according to Rotter, some events in the Old Testament can be considered as prefigurations or 'types' for U.S. foreign relations. In fact, we can find many models for actual U.S. foreign policy in the Old Testament:

Abraham's sacrifice of his son (Woodrow Wilson's decision to take part in war against Germany)

Sodom and Gomorrah (Bombing many cities)

Macabee's revolt (Political and moral restoration of Germany and Japan after World War Two)

Joseph and his brothers (Forgiveness after World War Two)

Original Sin (George Kennan's realism)

As for these foreign policies, it is important to interpret them doubly. On the one hand, they can be interpreted as fulfillments of models prefigured in the Old Testament. We can consider that they are supported by religious passion. But on the other hand, needless to say, they can be interpreted as results from cold realistic calculations. In other words, we can consider them as activities for pursuing selfish national interest. Therefore U.S. foreign policy can be characterized as the religious-secular duality which we have discussed. My question is how to interpret this paradoxical duality within a consistent framework.

Here I would like to shift this duality to the domain of political thought. Then we can find two opposite ideas. The secular position corresponds to multiculturalism, which supports tolerant coexistence of diverse cultures and lifestyles. The religious position corresponds to fundamentalism. Multiculturalism assumes that there is no comprehensive universal truth, such as religious truth from God. Therefore, according to multiculturalism, everyone can give meaning to his/her own life through his/her preferred narration. We have to

respect or recognize one other's narrations. So I call multiculturalism a supporter for the 'right to narrate.' Contrarily, fundamentalism can be characterized as 'attachment to the truth.' It believes in the existence of truth only.

Multiculturalism and fundamentalism seem to be furthest from each other. However, both are very dominant in contemporary American society. Seemingly multiculturalism is very convincing. Most secularized American liberals will support this idea. A stereotypical image of the fundamentalist is an Islamic extremist who is outsider to Western society. However, there are many fundamentalists (or Christian fundamentalists) in the U.S., as Ladermas's paper has shown. Sometimes the same person who advocates multiculturalism behaves himself like a fundamentalist (i.e. like the person who believes in the only universal truth). I would like to show the interdependency between multiculturalism and fundamentalism.

Donald Rumsfeld, ex-secretary of defense, has often said something interesting. His pseudo-philosophical words give a hint for our consideration. He said in March, 2003, 'There are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.' Rumsfeld said that the most dangerous thread is the third one. However, when we cross the object-level known-unknown axis with the meta-level known-unknown axis, there is one more category. There are unknown (meta-level) knowns (object-level): things we know we do not know. This is the definition of unconsciousness. The most dangerous category is not the third category, but this fourth one.

Here I pose a tentative question. Why can multiculturalists think that diverse lifestyles can coexist peacefully? Why do they exclude the possibility that different cultures are contradictory, although actually there are many contradictory cases in which we can find unsolvable conflicts such as 'Muslim women's veil problem' in France? Why can they be so optimistic about the feasibility of peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures? The reason is that multiculturalism considers the lifestyle, especially religious faith, as a kind of private taste or something like it. Various tastes can coexist peacefully. In other words, if his or her behavior means his or her commitment to a dogma as the truth, it is not permitted. Truth is intrinsically exclusive to other 'truth'.

However, frankly speaking, belief as a private taste is non-belief of religious dogma (because religious dogma is, by definition, the truth). This is almost negation of (religious) authentic faith. In other delicate words, according to multiculturalism it is permitted for everyone to pretend to believe any religion. We can do what believers will do. I pretend to believe, you can also. This is the implication of multiculturalism.

However, there is one more conversion. Although I do not have faith in God, I pray to God politely in church. In other words, I pretend to have faith. Why? Because someone other than I really has faith in God. Therefore my behavior

assumes the existence of someone who really believes. So long as I assume this 'someone', I am in the sphere of his or her belief.

Here I would like to introduce the notion of 'interpassivity', which Robert Pfaller created as the double of interactivity. For example, in a TV show 'the studio audience' or canned laughter take part in the show. Why are they needed? The studio audiences laugh at the show, are surprised by it, etc. However are the true audiences 'us', who are watching TV from here outside the TV? The audiences in the studio or canned laughter enjoy the show for 'us'. Even though the show is boring for me and I cannot laugh at it, even though I am so tired that I cannot enjoy the show, the audiences in studio really enjoy it for 'me'. Then I am enjoying the show 'objectively'. The function of studio audiences is the same as the function of 'weepers' at funerals in some societies. Weepers perform the spectacle of mourning for other participants, who may not cry. When weepers mourn for the dead other participants 'objectively' cry even if they do not cry really. This is the situation of interpassivity.

We can apply this theory to multiculturalism. If we pretend to believe (i.e. we do not believe God really), this behavior will be converted into believing God 'objectively' so long as we assume the existence of others who really believe God. In the world of multiculturalism we believe without knowing it. I have called such a state as 'ironical commitment.' Ironical commitment is the contradictory relationship between consciousness and (objective) behavior. At the level of consciousness, we take the ironical distance toward an object (e.g. we think that we do not believe really). At the level of behavior, our state can be regarded as commitment to object. Multiculturalist society consists of the ironical commitment of all members. Contemporary American society is one of multiculturalist societies.

The ironical commitment is realized, only when we presuppose that there is the other person whom we suppose to really believe (something). In other words, we project the real belief into this other person. We can understand not only multiculturalism, but also the fundamentalism in the context of 'ironical commitment.' What will happen if we cannot presuppose the existence of the other into whom we should project the belief? What if there is nobody who gets the joker from us in the card game 'old maid'? The direct commitment, the naïve belief will return to us. Fundamentalism can be defined as overlapping between 'self who pretends to believe' and 'the other supposed to really believe.'

Therefore, multiculturalism and fundamentalism are complementary to each other. Even though they seem to be against each other, they are dependent upon each other. As a result, both attitudes thrive in contemporary American society. In the light of 'ironical commitment', every social behavior can be interpreted doubly. Needless to say, the American foreign policies which Rotter has interpreted are not exceptional. They are determined by ironical commitment.